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# THE STEPCILD OF THE REPUBLIC.

BY WILLIAM E. SMYTHE.

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THE arid region of the United States is a stupendous public property. It is the heritage of the next generation of American citizens. To conquer and subdue it to the uses of civilization will be one of the mighty tasks of the twentieth century. What Africa is to the nations of Europe, Arid America is to the people of the United States—a vast, virgin field which lies open to industrial conquest—the natural outlet for surplus people and capital accumulated in more than two centuries of prosperity.

It is not easy to convey, in a paragraph or a page, a true impression of the size and character of the arid public domain. No other part of this country has been so deeply misunderstood. It has been misunderstood alike from the standpoints of industry and of society, of ethics, and of politics. Nature has written her story upon our arid lands in characters not easily legible to Anglo-Saxon eyes. But it is impossible to comprehend the brood of Western problems involved in any true policy for Arid America without considering at least an outline of certain large facts.

One-third of the total area of the United States is arid, which to the popular imagination means “worthless.” And six hundred million acres of this enormous district is still public land over which the authority of the American people is supreme. It is not strange that it is widely believed that this tremendous national possession is almost a misfortune. The region presents an outward aspect totally different from that of the Atlantic seaboard, or from that of the section lying between the Lakes and the Gulf, or from that of the Mississippi basin—which were occupied in three successive eras of settlement without making any peculiar demands upon the knowledge and ingenuity of a race

familiar with European conditions. It is not strange that a people reared in a different environment should think that aridity is a curse, though it is really a blessing; or that the arid region can sustain no important population, though it is fit to support a nation of one hundred millions; or that it cannot develop high forms of industry and society, though it is unquestionably destined to be the seat of a superior civilization. It is a perfectly natural human weakness to imagine that whatever is strange in the face of a country is bad, and that whatever is new and different in the fundamental processes of such an industry as agriculture, for instance, is crude and undesirable.

The word "irrigation," though it relates exclusively to water, is one of the driest words in the English language to those who understand it vaguely as importing a makeshift to remedy the shortcomings of the weather clerk. But irrigation is the foundation of civilization in arid countries. It is yet to become one of the most eloquent and fateful words to the American people. It moulds industry and society into new shapes. It will have much to do with the form and color of political and ethical standards in half a continent. The settler who made a clearing in the Massachusetts forest, or turned the prairie sod in Illinois, proceeded quite independently of his neighbor, and from this original germ of our Eastern population grew the strong individualism which characterizes our dominant commercial spirit. The settler in arid lands cannot grow the first potato, nor the first rose-bush, until he has associated himself with his fellows in the building of an irrigation canal. From this new germ we are to have, and are already having, a strange and hopeful plant which will give different characteristics to the industrial and social fabric of the Far West. What independence these conditions confer upon agriculture; how they regulate the size of the farm unit; how they lead inevitably to the evolution of new principles of commercial association; how they revolutionize the social character of both rural and urban communities—we may learn from the experience of the Mormon commonwealth in Utah, from the institutions in Colorado founded at the instance of Horace Greeley, and from the wonderful conquests over the desert accomplished in California during the last twenty years. What influences these conditions will finally project into the larger fields of

morals and politics, and how these influences will affect the destiny of the American people, are interesting subjects for speculation. It is sufficient for the present purpose to direct attention briefly to these facts and tendencies, to say that a great percentage of the American people will some time live in the arid region, and that the time has come when the nation should have at least the beginnings of a statesmanlike policy to apply to the problems of the vast material heritage that awaits her children.

The present national policy in the arid region is utterly unworthy of the occasion and the opportunity. It is not a policy at all, but a chaos of antiquated and outgrown land laws originally made for a humid region and bodily transferred to a country where natural conditions are precisely reversed. The legislation which suited the public lands of Ohio and Illinois is as useful and sensible in Idaho and California as ice-making machines would be in Greenland. In our profound and well-nigh incorrigible ignorance of our own country and its problems, we are doing unspeakable injustice to the most promising part of the United States, and deliberately saddling incalculable hardship and misery upon future generations. It is when the great West contemplates this wanton neglect of her needs that she sometimes feels that she is the stepchild of the Republic. For she is compelled to wear her sister's cast-off garments regardless of fit or appearance, and regardless of their adaptability to the peculiar conditions of the climate.

The Homestead Law is a misnomer in the arid region. It bids the citizen to go out and maintain himself for a certain period on land which, in spite of its incomparable fertility, can scarcely maintain a prairie dog or a rabbit until it has been artificially watered. The Desert Land Law is even more cruel and grotesque, because it not only bids the citizen to make a home, but to turn the course of a river, and so furnish himself with a complete system of irrigation before he can acquire title. The first law assumes that the new settler can live on climate and sagebrush. The second law assumes that he possesses a cash capital sufficient to start a national bank. Both laws would be jokes if they were not calamities. It is unquestionably true that this legislation was enacted in good faith, and supposedly in the interest of the settler, by the large majority of those whose votes put it upon the

statute book. But it was born of ignorance, and the time has come when it should die of enlightenment. The arid region is now needed as an outlet for a redundant and increasing population. Its potentialities have been demonstrated in a hundred valleys, and there is no longer excuse for delaying the formulation of a policy adapted to the peculiar condition of nearly half of the continent and quite one-third of the United States. The fact that some progress has been made under present laws is due to the supreme attractions of the arid region and to the absolute necessity of a little agriculture to feed other industries. But there can be no great development until the whole system of legislation and administration, as applied to Western resources, is radically reformed. The land laws as they stand to-day make perjury and fraud almost indispensable conditions of progress, or they prohibit progress altogether.

It is true that the Mormons in Utah have had no trouble in building irrigation canals and acquiring lands under the Homestead and Desert Land Laws. This is explained by the fact that with them the church was practically the state; and, so far as purely industrial and commercial affairs are concerned, the Mormon church has been a kind and considerate mother to her children. In their matters of irrigation and settlement, the Mormons have had state control to the verge of socialism. It is also true that in many other parts of the arid region, in narrow valleys where conditions are particularly favorable, farmers have combined their labor and constructed works to water their lands so that they could acquire them in perfect conformity to the law. But the arid lands lie mostly in broad deserts. These can only be reclaimed by costly works. If reclamation is attempted without the absolute control of the land, the capital is almost sure to be lost. Hence, when private individuals or companies build such works they generally seek to obtain control of the land. This can only be done by having "dummies" enter the land under the law, and then transfer it to the company. Land which has been reclaimed by this method cannot be had at government prices and is no longer public land open to entry by citizens. The public land and the public water have been acquired for speculative purposes, and the heritage which Congress intended for the homeseeker is private property, which can only be obtained by the payment of such prices as the private owner

chooses to put upon it. But that is not the worst. In appropriating the water of the public stream, and uniting it with the public land, and then transforming both into the assets of a private speculation, the irrigation company has perfected a new and dangerous monopoly to which the citizen and his descendants are expected to pay tribute, in the form of annual water rental, forever and forever. This is the practical operation of our present land laws. It impoverishes the nation without enriching the investor ; for the people will seldom pay the high prices demanded, nor will they live in peace with the water-lord when they have become his subjects. The whole system is a scandal and a disgrace to the American name. It is not worthy to be compared with the system which existed in China and Egypt a thousand years before this continent was discovered.

Our present methods are no better adapted to the requirements of forest and pasturage lands, nor to those of interstate and international rivers, than to the irrigable domain. Our so-called policy of forest "reservations" is a mockery. It is a reservation which does not reserve. It is a name without the faintest semblance of force behind it. The forests are precious not only for timber, but yet more in their relation to the water supply. They are nature's storage reservoirs. In permitting them to be wantonly destroyed by fire and axe we are devastating great and potentially fruitful valleys for all time. Men who would scorn to steal an armful of sticks from their neighbor's wood pile do not hesitate to commit wholesale larceny upon the nation's forests. But the firebrand is worse than the thief, and our present laws and administrative system, if it can be dignified by the phrase, are perfectly impotent in the presence of both.

Much the larger portion of the public domain consists of grazing lands. These we treat as a public common. Here the Indian has been succeeded by white men more savage than he. Sheep-men and cattle-men struggle for supremacy, fighting and shedding blood in the never-ending contest for possession of property which belongs to neither. The troops are ordered out occasionally to separate the combatants, but when this has been temporarily accomplished the beneficent nation rests from its labors. In the absence of any scientific determination of the boundary between irrigable and grazing lands, the settlers and the stockmen settle it among themselves according to the relative

amount of their ammunition. In the meantime, we are industriously engaged in civilizing harmless Indians.

Our present laws make no provision for the division and control of interstate and international waters. The condition of the arid region in this respect is little less than pitiable. But the entanglements and dispute which have thus far arisen from this source are as nothing to the troubles which will arise in the future not only between states, but between nations as well. The most grievous instances at present are concerned with the waters of the Arkansas, the Rio Grande, and the Platte. Colorado claims the right under her Constitution to use every drop of water that falls upon her soil. In utilizing this right, she deprives portions of Kansas and New Mexico of water which has flowed through their territory in natural channels for ages. New Mexico, in her turn, perpetrates a similar injury upon old Mexico, our sister republic on the south. In several instances costly irrigation works in the lower states have been rendered utterly worthless, while large tracts of land which could be made fruitful remain uncultivated because deprived of their natural water supply. It is startling to contemplate the ultimate extent of the troubles which may arise over the control and distribution of interstate waters. A few years ago an engineering genius made a map of Arid America as it would appear if States had been laid out in accordance with the watershed. He found it was very feasible indeed to reconstruct the entire political system of the West—on paper—in a way which would forever dispose of the knotty problem of conflicting rights to interstate streams. But he discovered that a scientific division of this sort would make twenty-six states out of the present fourteen states and three territories. The objection to the influx of twenty-four new Western senators, to say nothing of the social, commercial, and political disarrangement in a local way, would, of course, be fatal to such a solution of the problem, if seriously proposed. But the dangers of civil and economic conflict involved in the present situation is one of the strongest arguments in favor of the adoption of an enlightened national policy.

What policy has been proposed as a substitute for the present chaos of laws and impotence of administration in the arid region? But one solution has been offered with the slightest prospect of success. This is the cession of all the arid lands,

except mineral lands, to the states in which they lie. This plan has been repeatedly indorsed by the trans-Mississippi Congress and other Western bodies. But many who have favored it in the past now gravely hesitate to press the proposition at a time when it apparently has the support of the national administration and many powerful newspapers. The truth is that the plan of cession has been the policy of desperation. When Western men have seen, on one hand, the utter imbecility of present laws, and, on the other, the stolid indifference of the East to the needs of intelligent legislation, they have cried in despair: "Turn the lands over to us and we will solve our own problems." And the ready response of many Eastern public men and newspapers has been: "Take your worthless lands and give the country a rest." But against the plan of cession there has always been a protesting minority in the West which has not dared to trust to the wisdom and integrity of the States in a matter involving public property which represents a potential value of billions of dollars. This minority has also insisted that the problems of the arid region are national in their essence, and involve so many questions which transcend the boundaries of States that nothing less than the federal power itself can deal with them satisfactorily. Even the advocates of cession have conceded that the true statesmanlike solution would be a great national policy, under which federal authority should be associated with the powers of the several States in adjusting the intricate questions at issue and in making homes for millions of American citizens.

During the past two years events have occurred which put a new face on the whole question. These events are the passage by Congress of the "Carey law," donating to each of the desert States one million acres of arid land under certain conditions; and, second, the evident and gratifying growth of popular interest in Arid America and its institutions on the part of the country at large. Senator Carey's bill was a very happy inspiration. It satisfied those who had faith in the plan of cession without alarming those who were afraid of the plan. One million acres are a very small drop out of a very large bucket, and yet this grant suffices as a means of showing what the States can do for themselves. It leaves unsettled the question of the forests, of the grazing lands, and of interstate streams; but it furnishes a substitute for the Homestead and Desert Land laws and an



ample outlet to accommodate the present demands of surplus population. The Carey law was enacted in August, 1894, and formally accepted by the States of Wyoming, Colorado, Idaho, Washington, Montana, and Nevada during the legislative sessions of 1895. And the laws which the States enacted in connection with the acceptance of the grant were for the most part such as to justify the confidence of those who had believed in the ability and honesty of the State governments. These laws generally provided for State engineering departments to develop scientific plans of reclamation; for fixing the maximum price at which lands could be sold; and, most important and hopeful of all, for the transfer of the irrigation works to the landowners as fast as districts are settled. Much work is being done under the "Carey law" and the only complaint which has arisen under it is of restrictions which make it difficult to use the lands as the basis of securities issued for the purpose of raising money to construct works. The issue of such securities is not inconsistent with the spirit of the law and ought not to be with its letter. The remedy is to make the cession of the million acres absolute rather than conditional. The State should be trusted with full responsibility in connection with this comparatively small amount of land. In no other way is it possible to make the law a real test of the principle involved.

But although the Carey law has relieved the situation, it has not cured it. The true interest of the arid region and of the nation demands the application of a comprehensive policy, based on scientific and practical knowledge of all the diverse interests involved in these Western problems. Such a policy cannot be framed in a day or a year. But there are three steps which might be taken without delay, and which would prevent the further dissipation of national resources, while providing means toward a final solution. These steps are as follows:

1. Make the donation of one million acres to each of the States absolute and unconditional, so that the policy of State control of irrigable lands may be fairly tested.

2. Repeal the Homestead and Desert Land laws, and thus prevent the further acquirement of public lands for private speculation.

3. Appoint a National Irrigation Commission, composed of men especially fitted by training and experience for the under-

taking, and charge this commission with the work of studying the whole problem of the arid region, including forests, pasturage and agricultural lands, interstate and international streams. Let this commission consider how far the nation must co-operate with the States in developing the great public property represented by the arid region, and in making it the basis for the future settlement of millions of American citizens, and the seat of a wonderful industrial and social life.

The lands granted to the States under the Carey law will furnish an ample outlet for surplus population for the next five years. And, if this period is wisely used for the investigation and discussion of future policies, the dawn of the twentieth century will find Arid America in a position to sustain its part in the future growth of the United States. It is difficult to conceive of a single worthy objection to the moderate programme involved in the steps suggested. It calls for no large expenditure; it does no injustice to settler or investor; it does not plunge the nation into any headlong course from which it cannot retreat. It merely recognizes the existence of a rising national problem, and looks to its solution in time to meet the national need. It is such a plan as foreign statesmen have applied repeatedly and successfully when they have been dealing with undeveloped resources of vast ultimate value and importance.

It has been the fashion of certain Eastern newspapers to dispose of our great Western States and Territories with a sneer. Though these contain larger populations than did most Eastern States at the time of their admission to the Union, they are condemned as "rotten boroughs." Though the wealth of their natural resources is as ten to one compared with most Eastern States, they are treated as if they had no capabilities of future growth. The truth is that the most conservative authorities agree that Arid America can readily sustain as many people as now live in the entire Republic. But this mighty section is helplessly bound by a legacy of incongruous laws. The newspapers which assail and criticise it do nothing to assist in relieving it of its incubus. If half the energy used in criticism and arraignment were expanded in a generous effort to solve the problems of the West, several of the stock political epithets of the time would speedily become obsolete. It would seem as if the resources of our own country ought to be at least as interesting, to

our own people as the shadowy issues of Venezuela, South Africa, and the North Pole. But they receive far less attention in Congress, in the newspapers, and in the magazines.

The seventeen splendid States and Territories of the arid region should no longer be treated as step-children of the Republic. They are legitimate and self-respecting offspring of the mother nation—as much as Massachusetts, or New York, or Pennsylvania. They will do their equal share to earn the family living and to glorify the family name. Nature planned them on nobler lines than most of their elder sisters. All they require is a little intelligent attention and a little genuine good will. If this can be given before it is too late, Arid America will become the most hopeful and interesting ground in the United States during the next century. No fairer opportunity for material conquest awaits any other nation, or any other part of the world.

WILLIAM E. SMYTHE.